

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

## **Resistance to Classroom Participation: Minority Students, Academic Discourse, Cultural Conflicts, and Issues of Representation in Whole Class Discussions**

*It doesn't seem fair to me that you can get penalized for not talking much, that the quieter students get graded down just because they're quiet...some students, students like me, have good reasons not to talk.*

- Alex (a first-generation, gay minority college student)

### Abstract

When trying to utilize class discussions as an effective pedagogical tool, teachers need to be aware of the conflicts that may arise due to issues of personal and cultural representation, linguistic differences, and misunderstandings of the tacit 'rules' for participation. Because of cultural and linguistic variances in student populations, not all students are equally adept at class participation nor are all students equally prone to participate. Educators must understand—and take into account in their grading practices—that a failure to participate does not necessarily reflect disrespect for the teacher or the class, a disinterest in the subject matter, or apathy in general. Sometimes, minority students choose not to participate in an effort to maintain their sense of personal and cultural identity and/or because they lack a full understanding of the kinds of academic discourse employed in classroom discussions.

**Keywords:** Minority Students, Cultural Representation, Class Participation, Resistance, Participation

**Word Count:** 6,060

### **Introduction: The Rise of Discussion and Participation as an Effective Pedagogical Tool**

In recent years regular student participation in whole class discussions has become an increasingly integral part of many classrooms in the K-12 educational environment and in the university setting. Though calls for increased 'cooperative learning' through class participation are nothing new—John Dewey, who began blazing this pedagogical trail more than 100 years ago (Dewey, 1902; Dewey, 1916) was no

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doubt himself influenced by the dialogue-centered Socratic method—whole-class and group discussion have in the last thirty years become a standard pedagogical practice. A review of the literature on class discussion as a learning tool reveals a dramatic rise in research and writing on the topic beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see, for example: Bilorusky, 1969; Clark & Ramsey, 1970; Crittenden, 1969).

Since that time—and spurred in part by the appeal of Paulo Freire’s “problem-posing” method of teaching (Freire, 1970)—educational researchers and teacher educators have focused attention on the pedagogical benefits of class discussion (Brooks, 2001; Murphy et al, 2003; Nixon-Pinder, 1995; Sauve, 1987; Wade, 1994). As a result, colleges of education, non-university-based teacher training programs, and university faculty teaching seminars have all emphasized to prospective teachers (and to practitioners through professional development and continuing education programs) the need to dispel with lectures in lieu of more participatory activities whenever possible (Comor-Jacobs, 1993; Wade, 1994; Vandrick, 2000). Class discussion, it would appear from its widespread adoption as a pedagogical tool and from almost all of the available research, provides many educational benefits and few—if any—drawbacks.

Research shows that class participation certainly does have myriad pedagogical benefits (Petress, 2006; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Using discussion as a pedagogical tool is, modern educational theory holds, a useful means of engaging students in their own learning. Class discussion provides students with a voice—an outlet—through which they are able to express their own beliefs on a given topic. Expressing one’s beliefs on a subject is a viable means for taking ownership—and internalizing—the lessons being presented in class (Girgin & Stevens, 2005, Luse, 2002; Nixon-Ponder, 1995). Similarly,

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proponents of whole-class and group discussion argue that their pedagogical approach engenders a more democratic classroom culture and thereby helps “empower” students (Bowden, 1998; Girgin & Stevens, 2005; Schmitt-Boshnick and Scott, 1995). Whole class discussion allows for the expression of a multiplicity of views (Finn, 1993; Damico and Rosaen, 2009; Vandrick, 2000) and for this reason is said to foster better student attitudes toward their classes; no longer is the teacher the sole arbiter of meaning within a more vocal classroom culture (Brodie, 2010; Damico and Rosaen, 2009; Freire, 1970; Nixon-Ponder, 1995). Discussions also serve as a potential means of breaking down the learning barriers presented by the teacher/student dichotomy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970, hooks, 1994, 2003). Use of class discussion—and with it students’ voices in the meaning-making process—as a pedagogical tool is, in many ways, the very antithesis of the “banking” model of education, in which the teacher is generally seen as the repository of knowledge and students are viewed as empty vessels, waiting to be filled with information (hooks, 1994, 2003; Houser, 2007; Freire, 1970). Finally, another line of research shows that discussion is itself a useful means of preparing young people for the collaborative experiences they will encounter later in life; discussion serves as a site of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 29). Participation in classroom discussions and interactions with adult teachers provide students with the opportunity to ‘apprentice’ in the kinds of discourses and associated practices—including self-assessments—that will be required of them in the workforce (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005; Gee, 1998, 2000; Girgin and Stevens, 2005; Lave and Wenger, 1991). For the reasons stated above, class discussion has become a central tenet behind the constructivist

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and participatory educational models in vogue today in both colleges of education and in classrooms themselves.

Because of its well-documented educational benefits, participation in whole-class discussions in both K-12 classrooms (specifically high school classrooms) and college classrooms has taken on increasing weight (Jones, 2008). Evidence suggests that use of class discussion has become an increasingly common pedagogical tool in elementary and middle-school classrooms (Blum, Koskinen, Bhartiya, Hluboky, 2010; Damico and Rosaen, 2009; Leachman and Victor, 2003). Similarly, research on the benefits of discussion and participatory education encourages high school teachers (and other K-12 educators) to use levels of participation in their overall evaluations of student performance (Rocca, 2010; Wood and Endres, 2004). Class discussion has become so popular a learning tool that it is even being employed more liberally in public secondary school math and science classrooms, which arguably are—or were—some of the last bastions of more traditional (teacher-centered) pedagogical practices (Grouws and Cebulla, 2000; Hansen-Thomas, 2009; Nagy-Shadman and Desrochers, 2008; Schink, Neale, Pugalee, Cifarelli, 2009; Tan and Calabrese, 2010; Turner and Patrick, 2004).

It is not surprising then that this increased emphasis on participation has manifested itself in the evaluation of levels of participation when grading overall student performance (Craven and Hogan, 2001; Mainkar, 2008; Rex et al, 2002; Ryan, Marshall, Porter, Jia, 2007). It is common for secondary teachers to consider students' respective levels of participation—through formal and informal means formally when calculating grades (Dancer and Kamvounias, 2005; Ryan, Marshall, Porter, Jia, 2007). Increasingly, college-level professors include participation on their course syllabi as a significant factor

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in a students' eventual course grades (Craven and Hogan, 2001; Mainkar, 2008). Newer technologies—such as Student Response Technology (SRT) (aka “clickers”)—are often used for assessing students' participation in college courses (Nagy-Shadman and Desrochers, 2008).

It is increasingly clear that earning the highest marks in many classes has become difficult—if not impossible—without also receiving a favorable evaluation of participation. Highlighting this fact are the existence of research-based grading rubrics designed to help practitioners evaluate student participation (Bean and Peterson, 1998; Dancer and Koumvanias, 2005; Ryan et al., 2007), guides for facilitating and improving class discussions (Girgin and Stevens, 2005; Hollander, 2002; Moller, 2002; Nussbaum, 2002), and even electronic means of tracking and assessing student participation (Chen, 2010; Nagy-Shadman and Desrochers, 2008).

### **Complicating a ‘Sound’ Pedagogical Practice**

While increased use of group or whole class discussions has shown significant educational benefits for many students (Weaver and Qi, 2005), and some research has suggested that it may be especially useful for engaging minority students in the curricula and in the class culture (Strambler and Weinstein, 2010), the potential negative effects of mandatory class participation have gone largely ignored. In one of the few research articles examining class participation, Jones (2008) notes how faculty and teachers' misunderstanding of the effective uses of (and preparation for) class participation can complicate and even disrupt lessons and learning for students. Further research into this area demonstrates that discussion as a pedagogical tool may not be equally well-suited

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for all students (Gardner & Hatch, 1989; Howard, Zoeller, and Pratt, 2006; Kolb, 1984).

While some researchers call for increased use of class participation as a means toward engaging minority students (Comor-Jacobs, 1993; Hefflin, 2002; Strambler and Weinstein, 2010; Tan and Calabrese Barton, 2010), others have found that high levels of class participation have little effect on learning for these students (Beilin and Rabow, 1979). Jones (2008) notes how misunderstanding effective uses of class participation can complicate and even disrupt lessons and learning for students. Even in classes that engage students in widespread participation, the benefits tend to be less pronounced for minority students because these students participate at far lower levels than do white students (Chu and Kim, 1999; Howard, Zoeller, and Pratt, 2006; Mertz et al, 1998). As these conflicting conclusions suggest, research on the effects of class participation on minorities is ambiguous at best (Finn, 1993). In light of the growing popularity of whole class discussions and the grading of participation in K-12 and college classrooms, far too little research has been conducted on its effects on minority and linguistically-diverse students. This study aims to redress this increasingly critical issue. Recent research in language, identity, and culture (including this study) has made one thing clear: teachers' expectations for widespread classroom participation—and the power that teachers have to pressure students into participating—may adversely affect some minority students, thereby further silencing minority voices and further alienating these students from their white peers and instructors (White, 2007).

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### **Minorities, Culture, Language, and Issues of Representation**

Because minority students bring with them to the classroom their own cultural norms, their own culturally-imbued patterns of communication, and beliefs which may differ from that of the mainstream (Au, 1980, 1991; Delpit, 1992; Ervin-Tripp, 1971; Heath, 1983), they are often reluctant to voice their ideas in class (Ogbu and Wilson, 1990; White, 2007). Ogbu (1987) and Ogbu and Wilson (1990) have demonstrated how many minority students correlate class participation (and using the academic discourse required for many such exchanges) as “acting white,” something these students are understandably reluctant to do. Research on student satisfaction with schooling and student attrition levels at the secondary and college levels has shown that virtually all K-12 and college students desperately want to fit in with their peers (Lehmann, 2007; Margolis, 1976; Sadava and Park, 1993; Park, DiRaddo, Calogero, 2009). Yet, forcing minority students to talk in class, especially about sociologically sensitive issues, sometimes serves to highlight their cultural or ideological differences from the mainstream and alienate them further from their classroom peers (Ogbu and Wilson, 1990; White, 2007).

Similarly, because they are often the sole minority in their classes, many minority students feel that their words and ideas are not accepted—by instructors and especially by fellow students—in the same way as those of their white peers. Many minority students feel that their ideas are discounted as those of “someone with a grudge” against the dominant system rather than as the ideas and feelings of an individual (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; White, 2007). Ironically, and at the same time, many students of color feel that their words and ideas take on greater significance in the classroom context and beyond, especially when discussing matters of race, history, economic class, and culture. Minority

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students often find that they are expected to speak for the entirety of their cultures' experiences. Such unrealistic expectations fall under the umbrella of "tokenism" (Sax, 1996), in which individuals "are often treated as symbols or representatives of the marginal social group to which they belong...[a]s a result, their thoughts, beliefs, and actions are likely to be taken as typical of all in their social group." (Newman, 2002, para 2). Many minority students feel, however, that they lack the knowledge and information that they would need to to speak for the whole of their culture's experience (White, 2007). Similarly, many cultural norms—especially those of Native Americans—specifically prohibit such cultural representation (Demmert, 2002; Pinxten, 1995; White, 2007). Thus, minority students are doubly challenged with having to overcome cultural differences to express their views while at the same time they are expected to represent such differences on a much larger scale.

Minority students are also more prone than their white peers to experience a clash of communication styles between their home culture and that of the school (Au, 1980, 1991; Delpit, 1992; Heath, 1983). Schools promote and expect a specific kind of discourse (Elbow, 1998; Heath, 1983; Gee, 1998; Snow, 1991). Yet, research has shown that there is no guarantee that all students—especially minority students—are familiar with the conventions of the unique discursive style of the academy (Au, 1991; Gee, 1998; Heath, 1983; Snow, 1991). Thus, students not versed in such discourse lack the 'codes of power' with which to express themselves appropriately (Delpit, 1992; Gee, 1998; White, 2007). For those who are familiar with academic discourse, they must face the difficult dilemma of either code switching to this dominant discourse or having their ideas discounted because they are not expressed in the culturally accepted way of the school



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(Delpit, 1992). Complicating matters is the fact that minority students often equate using the dominant academic discourse as “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; White, 2007). Thus, adopting academic discourse is, for some students, viewed as being disrespectful toward their own cultures; it is tantamount to ‘selling out’ a distinct part of their own culture to that of the oppressor (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Wilson, 1990). It is not surprising therefore that some minority students develop a “cultural aversion” to class participation (Ogbu and Wilson, 1990, p.30).

Thus, students who differ from the majority sometimes find themselves in an awkward predicament: participate in class (to earn a good grade) and further alienate themselves from their peers or from their native cultures, or stay silent in class (and earn a lesser grade) and find greater acceptance in the social culture of the school. To be pedagogically sound and culturally-sensitive, teachers must be aware of this cultural/linguistic conflict when designing their courses, their classroom expectations, and they should take appropriate steps to counter the potentially negative effects of mandatory class participation.

### **Method**

Data for this study came from semester-long case studies of four minority college freshmen. The main purpose of this study was to examine the issue of class participation at a large, predominantly white (> 80%), western university and how demands for participation affected minority students’ sense of self (or more specifically, their academic identity) and their overall academic experience.

Study participants were all first-generation college students and included a Native American male (Simon), an African American female (Latricia), a Hispanic male (Alex)

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and a Hispanic female (Maria)<sup>1</sup>, all from western states. These students were on academic probation due to poor first-semester college performance (< 2.0 cumulative GPA) and faced possible suspension or dismissal if failing to reach the minimum satisfactory GPA. They had sought out help from the University's Student Services Center, where they were referred to the author for participation in the study.

The author collected data from a number of sources. Each student participated in pre- and post-study interviews and each met with the author weekly in one to one-and-a-half hour individual meetings throughout the semester to discuss her/his level of class participation, issues for participation or lack thereof, and overall academic progress. During these meetings, the students were asked questions specifically designed to elicit answers about the effects of culture and language on participation in classes (and inclusion within the overall university setting). Their responses were recorded in detailed fieldnotes as well as in audio recordings (when appropriate). Samples of students' academic work—especially their written work—were collected and photocopied in order to assess how they represent their thoughts through language and how professors responded to their work. In addition, each student kept a journal of her/his thoughts about class participation, academic tasks, social life, and the overall problems encountered throughout the semester. Lastly, a university database was accessed (with student and departmental permission) to keep track of each student's academic records, which revealed the student's past and present academic standing, personal and demographic information, and professors' mid-term comments on the student's performance (including their participation and attendance in class).

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

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Data was coded using domain and componential analyses (Spradley) as well as a constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After data analysis—and during the write-up phase—students were allowed the opportunity to provide feedback on the accuracy of specific findings and analysis (three of four accepted and contributed to this process).

### **Findings**

Each student who participated in this study demonstrated a significant reluctance to speak in class, even though they were aware that participation grades affected their overall grades and therefore affected their academic status (three of the four students claimed that low participation levels carried over from their high school experiences—for similar reasons as described below. Each student cited common reasons for her or his unwillingness to speak in class. First, these students all demonstrated feelings of academic and linguistic incompetence (not knowing the parlance common to academia, hereafter described as “academic literacy”). They were fearful that because they were members of relatively small minorities in their classes, they were expected to speak for the entirety of their respective cultures’ experiences during classroom discussions. Also contributing to these students’ desire to remain silent was the fact that their course instructors seldom seemed (to them) to set explicit classroom rules for participation nor did instructors act as effective moderators of discussions. Rather, Simon, Alex, Latricia and Maria each claimed that professors were, as Alex said, “Not correcting stuff...like, letting students say just anything, even if it was mean or even wrong.” As a result, each student expressed a distinct fear of being called on by teachers or being expected to speak

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in class discussions. Consequently, these students made conscious decisions not to participate in classes, thereby affecting their academic performance as well as their sense of belonging to the academic community in which they found themselves.

Highlighting the depth of these students fears of speaking/participating in class was their unanimous 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. Maria said that because she would “rather sit and listen, not talk,” she preferred to take large lecture classes even though she found them “pretty dull” and admitted that she found it “really hard to stay focused [in them].” Similarly, Alex said, “I like bigger classes, ‘cause you get picked on in smaller classes. I don’t like getting picked on.” When asked to define what he meant by “getting picked on,” Alex responded with, “Picked on like...[students and teachers] ask me questions and expect me to answer. They want you to talk in front of class, to answer stuff. I don’t like being singled out or asked to talk like that.” It is 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 meaning. Yet, for reasons to be discussed, each of the study participants did feel that being forced to speak in class was a form of punishment, one that was disproportionately unfair to them as minorities.

### **Differences in Language and Discourse**

*I came here [college] not speaking the language of everyone else*

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

- Simon, a first-generation, Native American student

Not knowing the kinds of discursive styles common to classroom discussions was a primary reason for these students' reluctance to participate in their classes. Though imbued with their own culturally-rich 'ways with words,' these students quickly found that their native way of speaking clashed with the discourse common to that used in class discussions. Not surprisingly, each student expressed a common fear that, by speaking in class—using his or her own native voice/discursive style—he or she would be judged in a negative manner. Rather than face judgment from a group of people they already distrusted (based on cultural differences and a history of racial oppression), these students chose to remain silent. Thus, the very purpose of class participation—allowing the exploration of ideas and the creation of a democratic classroom community—was hampered. Because these students (who were most often the sole minority representative in their smaller classes) refused to participate, the full expression of a multiplicity of voices and views became impossible.

Alex explained his reluctance to speak with the following: “ 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.” Ironically, Alex was highly intelligent and introspective, he expressed himself well, and—at least compared to the other students in the study—he had a GPA that was close to the minimum threshold (1.9 cumulative). He had good ideas and the ability to express them. Yet because he felt that he spoke in a different manner than his white peers, he worried that his ideas would not be taken seriously or worse, that he would be judged negatively—not so much for what he said,

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

but rather for how he said it: “I think my ideas are pretty good,” he said, “It’s just that I’m not sure how to get them out, to, you know, to make others understand.” Maria echoed Alex’s sentiments. She said early on in the study, “Why should they [students and professors] listen to me? Why should I say anything if, because of, like, how I say it, I’m not gonna be taken seriously?” Maria consistently argued that it was pointless to speak in class because her ideas would not be taken seriously (by the other students and by the professor) because of her manner of expression. She therefore refused to even try to speak, even though she admitted that “it [not participating] probably hurts me some.” Simon, the Native American student (and the sole representative of his tribe at college that year), inadvertently created an analogy when he explained his reticence to speak in classes: “Here, it’s like, you know, I feel more intimidated...I feel a lot of intimidation from them [his peers and professors] because of how different I am from them, how I talk and all...*I came here [college] not speaking the language of everyone else*” (emphasis added). Simon was, obviously, aware that the conventions of academic discourse—with which his mainstream peers seemed well-versed—were largely foreign to him; he felt that his peers were using a different kind of language. His feelings were well-justified.

All of these students were, in their first months at college, experiencing a phenomenon that has been explored in some depth in recent years by educational researchers (though primarily at the K-5 levels): the clash of home/native discourse and that of the academic community. Research on the connection of language to culture, identity and to schooling (Au, 1980, 1986, 1991; Bizzell, 1982; Corson, 2001; Gee, 1998; Heath, 1983 and Hymes, 1971) has shown how different uses of language (based largely on culture) may conflict with the forms of language used in and expected by American

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

schools. Central to this research is the belief that schools are themselves discourse or speech communities within which specialized ways of using language are practiced (White, 2007). As this area of research highlights, the discourse style of American schools mirrors, in general, the discourse pattern of white, middle- and upper-class America. Yet, as Cultural Reproduction Theory and Cultural Difference Theory point out, cultural identity is established largely through specific uses of language (Heath, 1983) and is transmitted from generation to generation (Willis, 1977). Students learn to appropriate the kinds of language/discourse common to their culture. Unfortunately, such forms of discourse, though unique, often differ from those employed within the school setting, thereby leading to discursive/linguistic clashes or conflicts. In this case, students' voices were largely silenced—or, more appropriately, these students censored themselves—because they recognized that their own culturally-significant ways of talking were incongruent with the 'official' discourse of the academy.

### **Fear of Revealing Academic Incompetence**

*I just need to be able to be more confident, to be able to speak my mind freely and not really be afraid of what I say*

- Simon, first-generation Native American student

Another factor cited as a reason not to participate in class was a feeling of academic inferiority. All of the students in the study at some point claimed that their schooling had not been sufficient enough to prepare them for college and to allow them to compete—especially verbally—with their peers. Said Simon of his pre-collegiate academic experiences, “Everyone, you know, other students *and* teachers, said that I

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

wouldn't, I can't do it [get into a good college], you know...My school just wasn't like that [competitive], you know." Thus in contrast to many of his freshmen peers, who "always knew they'd get somewhere like here," Simon felt that he had achieved something major simply by getting to the university itself. Describing his high school as "not so good, you know," Simon had achieved a major goal simply by being accepted to college. He was, however, very aware of the difference in his college preparation and that of most of his college peers. Similarly, summarizing both her own experience and that of the other study participants, Maria said: "It's like, well, they're [her college peers] all rich. They went to, like, really good schools...My high school, it was a joke. We didn't read anything, we didn't do anything." Each of the students realized that, compared to many of their peers, their pre-collegiate experiences had not been as academically rigorous.

Being aware that their high school experiences did not "measure up to the schooling of everyone else here," as Simon put it, these students began to question whether or not they had the content knowledge with which to speak on matters being discussed in class. Simon felt that, from their previous educational experiences, other students had earned more cultural capital which they could expend in the classroom setting:

Yeah, it's like they know more. I'll be like, they're from a higher class, they know more about the economic and business systems and, things and radicalism and activism and other stuff...It's like, you know, they've [his mainstream college peers] heard of this stuff [issues in class] before, they already kind of know it a little bit.



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Similarly, when questioned on why she did not speak in class, for example, Latricia responded that “I guess somebody knows it better or something. What if I don’t know it as well as someone else or somebody knows it better? What if I don’t know it as well as I think I know it, or as well as other people do?” Similarly, Simon said that his peers appeared to have more knowledge than he did and that they tended to speak with authority on a plethora of issues: “They’re so into it, you know, they forget that they’re talking to a lower, a person who don’t (sic) know about the subject...[when] they talk about it [a subject] they seem like, you know, like they already know about it...it’s like they’re not worried [if] the things they’re saying are wrong.” Simon and the other study participants, on the other hand, felt that they knew very little—that learning about these things was the reason for coming to college—and therefore had no authority to speak on academic matters. Simon: “...it’s like, you know, I’m not really confident being here and in classes. I know I know a little bit about it [the academic issues discussed in his classes], but I don’t know much about it.” Even in discussions of minority issues (and in other classes with general discussions on sociological/political topics), these students felt that their experiences—personal and academic—were not in themselves preparation enough to join in class conversations. They were afraid that they would appear “stupid” by speaking. Again, as a result of their observations—and their misconceptions of their fellow students—these students remained silent in class.

What these (and many minority) students did not realize was that their peers did not necessarily know more than they did. Rather, their more mainstream peers were simply demonstrating many of the characteristics common to academic discourse—a

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

discursive style with which they were not yet fully literate. During class discussions, for example, classmates tended to remove references to themselves when stating their ideas or opinions in class, which thereby gave their statements an air of authority (Macken-Horarik, 1998; Spack, 1998). Similarly, they stated their opinions explicitly and without doubt—again a trait of academic discourse (Elbow, 1998; Street, 1982)—thereby suggesting that their ideas were factual rather than rooted in feeling or experience. They were using a discursive style—one common to academic discourse—that Peter Elbow (1998) says has a tendency to “exclude ordinary people” (p. 78). The study participants, who did not know the rhetorical style of academic discourse, did feel excluded. Their peers’ statements came across as factual and therefore as content knowledge that they lacked. Though the study participants likely knew relatively as much as did many of their peers—especially in discussions of race, ethnicity, and culture—the very discursive style that most other students used to make their points made them feel excluded. Feeling both inferior academically and intellectually, these students were essentially excluded—or they excluded themselves—from class discussions and participation.

### **Talking White and Selling-Out: Reluctance to Appropriate ‘Academic Discourse’**

*It just doesn't feel right, like to have to talk that way...I shouldn't have to change who I am, or the way I talk to make them happy.*

- Latricia, first-generation African-American college student

Though the study participants became aware—in part through the study itself—of the importance of speaking and participating in their classes, they all demonstrated a reluctance to attempt to appropriate academic discourse. Even when they felt that they

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

had important things to add to class conversations, these students were resistant to using the kinds of discourse required for doing so. In short, each student showed a significant ambivalence to “talk white” (as Maria put it) in order to be heard and respected in class. Using academic discourse was, to these minority students, tantamount to “selling out” their cultural or ethnic traditions. To them, to be heard in class required “talking like white people, acting like white people” (Alex).

Maria, for example, claimed later in the study that though she knew how to “talk like they [teachers and other students] expect me to,” she did not want to do so. Rather, she equated using academic discourse—and with it “using big words”—as acting white and “selling out.” Maria even complained of some of her fellow minority students, especially those who tended to perform well academically in her classes, that “it’s like they try to be like them [the white students] so that they’ll like them, so they’ll fit in.” These minority students were, Maria suggested, not being true to their own cultural identity because they were trying too hard to be accepted by their mainstream peers. Maria said of herself that “I’m not like them. I don’t want to be like them.” Similarly, Latricia claimed that, “to get taken seriously here [at the university]” she needed to “talk like they [her white peers] do.” Though Latricia claimed that she could appropriate a more “white” form of discourse, she too was reluctant to do so. She said, “It just doesn’t feel right, like to have to talk that way...I shouldn’t have to change who I am, or the way I talk to make them happy.” Consequently, Maria and Latricia each felt ill at ease in trying to use the discourse of many of her peers. Not only did they see it as being disingenuous to their respective cultural backgrounds, they were hostile to and judgmental of minorities who had appropriated this “white” way of speaking. At least at

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

first, they failed to see that different circumstances require different forms of communication; they had to learn the important lesson that “code-switching” is required if one wishes to find success in different contexts. Similarly, they did not see the addition of academic discourse to their ‘repertoire’ of discourses as part of an additive process (Ogbu & Wilson, 1990); they tended to view code-switching as a more permanent—and thus a more culturally threatening—endeavor.

Alex and Simon, to a lesser degree, also demonstrated a belief that using academic discourse required, in essence, “talking like a white person” (Alex). In contrast to Maria and Latricia, however, Alex and Simon saw the appropriation of academic discourse as a means to an end (academic success) and thus as something that they were willing to try despite their initial reservations. Said Alex, “It’s not like I like it [talking in such a manner], but it’s, like, one of the things I’ve just gotta do to get where I want to be.” In behavior and action, Alex and Simon demonstrated a greater willingness to challenge themselves by trying to use a foreign discursive practice. Though there are myriad reasons behind their greater willingness to appropriate academic discourse, much of their motivation seemed to be correlated with external pressures to succeed in college. Simon, for example, had a tribal scholarship that he was in danger of losing. The threat of going home having lost the scholarship was a persistent threat. Similarly, being the first of his extended family to go to college, he feared the bad example he would set for his siblings, cousins, and more distant relatives if he were to fail at college:

It’d be bad, man. I mean, like, I’d let them all down, you know? They’re expecting me to get it done, to do good (sic). They’re [his people] even paying for it [through a reservation scholarship]...So, if I have to go home

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

a failure, if I can't survive here and do good, they'll all be disappointed...

my little brother and sister couldn't look to me no more.

Alex also feared the consequences of college failure. He saw college as a place in which he could more fully be himself. As a young gay male trying to come out of the closet, he felt that the large and liberal university setting was more amenable to his lifestyle (in comparison to his conservative, Catholic mother, with whom he would have to live if he failed at college and to whom he had not come out). He saw staying in school as one of the only ways that he could “you know, be myself.” He stated, “If I improve, she [his mother] can't use my grades to keep me from coming back here next year.” He had also formed his first real romantic relationship during his first semester; he very much wanted to be able to stay at school in order to maintain that relationship. He wrote in his journal that “I've got to do well so that I can stay with my bf over the summer... ‘I've got to stay [in college] for it [his relationship] to work.’” The external pressures to succeed at college put an added pressure on Alex and Simon. This pressure may have been just what they needed to attempt to appropriate a discourse toward which they each held some ambivalence. The sacrifice of trying on a new discourse—and with it a slightly altered identity—outweighed other, even less appealing options.

Regardless, each of these students' stories highlight a problem common to many minorities' attempts to become more fully integrated into the academic culture: the feeling that they must assimilate to a culture that has, historically, been very hostile toward them. Because academic language and discourse are so closely associated with a white, western model—and because white culture has historically been responsible for the oppression of minorities—minority students entering this community may be resistant

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

to appropriating such a discourse for themselves. Rather, many minority students even form a “cultural inversion” (Ogbu and Wilson, 1990, p.30) to this form of communication. Maintaining culturally-imbued discursive practices and thereby avoiding academic discourse serves, for some students, as a “boundary making mechanism” (Ogbu and Wilson, 1990). This is especially relevant for students who find themselves in what they perceive as an environment hostile towards them, such as a predominantly white school, college, or classroom:

Minorities do not interpret the language and cultural differences they encounter in school and society as barriers to overcome; they interpret such differences as symbols of their identity to be maintained. Their culture provides a frame of reference that gives them a sense of collective or social identity, a sense of self worth (Ogbu and Wilson, 1990, p. 30).

The experiences of Maria and Latricia support this claim. Faced with changing their academic habits—specifically taking a more active role in classes—they instead chose to distance themselves from their peers (and from academic discourse) in an effort to remain closer to their respective cultural heritages.

The experiences of Alex and Simon, conversely, demonstrate that students can learn the importance of code-switching to help them reach their goals. Learning academic literacy was, they came to accept, an integral part of academic success. Though academic discourse in many ways represented the voice of a repressive ‘other,’ it also represented to Simon and Alex an avenue to greater empowerment. They could, by learning its uses and employing it for their own purposes, get the education they needed and use this knowledge to, as Simon said, “tell our [Navajo] story in my own way.” The examples

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

provided by Simon and Alex add support to the belief that “boundary crossing in culture, language, and cognition can be an additive process. One does not have to give up his or her identity, language, or culture by learning and succeeding in the mainstream” (Ogbu & Wilson, 1990, pp. 58-59).

### **Conclusion**

Having the opportunity to voice one’s ideas in class is empowering; being forced to do so, however, can be oppressive. Students bring with them to class rich personal histories, distinct cultural traditions, and culturally-imbued rules for communicating. Calls for mandatory participation without a full understanding of the issues discussed above can actually be counterproductive. Demands for universal class participation—sans the development of a safe classroom culture, specific and universally understood rules for such discussion, and assurances that all students (especially minority students) understand the unique discursive styles used in such discussions—in many cases defeats the very purposes of class discussion: participatory and democratic education. It can also further alienate the very students most in danger of feeling excluded from mainstream classes.

Therefore, when creating classroom rules, course syllabi, and when expressing their expectations for student performance, educators also need to understand the cultural implications of their demands, address these issues with students, and conduct their classes in a culturally-sensitive manner. Similarly, educators must understand that a failure to participate does not necessarily reflect disrespect for the teacher or the class, a disinterest in the subject matter, or apathy in general. Often, minority students choose not to participate in an effort to maintain their sense of personal and cultural identity (Delpit,

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

1992; Ogbu and Wilson, 1990). Therefore, teachers wishing to use regular classroom discussion as a pedagogical tool should first set relatively explicit rules for participation (and for listening), foster a community of learners (a safe haven for minority students to speak out), and they must understand that mandatory universal participation is not always pedagogically sound. Like any pedagogical tool, the use of class discussion can be either effective or ineffective based upon the classroom culture, the students in the class, and the interactions between students and teachers.

Finally, it is also imperative, this study finds, to make certain that all class participants—especially minority students—are literate in academic discourse and understand the need to be able to ‘code-switch’ into and out of it. Though diverse students may bring to the classroom unique ideas and alternative linguistic styles, without knowing the “dominant” or “status” discourse (Delpit, 1992, pp. 297-8) prevalent in the academic setting, they are unlikely to find inclusion or success within this community. Becoming familiar with the dominant discourse of the school sometimes entails direct instruction (via classes or through individual tutoring/mentoring) in the conventions of academic discourse (White, 2007). College preparation programs, freshmen orientation programs, and college counselors should, ideally, openly discuss the discursive ‘rules’ for participation in college-level classes.

Success in teaching academic discourse also requires acknowledging the additive nature of code-switching. Students must be shown that they do not have to sacrifice an important part of their own identity when they enter new discourse communities; rather, they should be made aware of the many ways in all people in complex societies code-switch on a regular basis. College and high school-level educators should, for example,



White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

explore with students the myriad discourse communities in which they—the students—are already fluent. Students are, generally speaking, fluent in pop-culture discourses, technical discourses (text messaging shortcuts for example), and hip-hop discourses. They also understand the concept of discourse communities (though they would not term them as such). They know, for example, not to speak to a police officer or a judge as they would to their parents or to friends at a party. They know that while using profanity is perfectly acceptable in some contexts, it is far from appropriate in church. We as educators need to make clear that we all change discourses as we navigate through different and complex milieu. We often do so unconsciously. One of our goals, therefore, should be to bring such routine code-switching to light. Through example, students are better able to see that who they are as individuals—their core culture—does not change when they enter into and interact within different communities. Instead, new worlds begin to open up to students when they are empowered to speak.

Students can, through learning to code-switch to academic discourse, become “full participants” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 105) in the college community. Ironically, when more students from diverse cultures and discourses do become full participants—when the academic community begins to more closely represent the greater national demographic—academic discourse itself might begin to change to reflect this diversity. In the meantime, our goal as educators must be to foster greater participation from all voices while also being aware that silence represents far more than a student’s lack of interest, knowledge, or desire to participate.

White, J. (accepted for publication). Resistance to classroom participation: Minority students, academic discourse, cultural conflicts, and issues of representation in whole class discussions. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*.

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