DISRUPTING AUTHORITY: WRITING MENTORS AND CODE-MESHING PEDAGOGY

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At our small, private, historically black university (HBCU) in Raleigh, North Carolina, we were adding a few new touches to the Writing Center in preparation for the semester—cleaning some hard-to-reach places, updating computers, and posting new signs on the walls. After hanging one sign in particular, we paused and took a few steps back, arms crossed, heads tilted—considering. Above the shelves containing our handouts on common grammatical errors, words in black letters now read: *Most Common Errors in "Standard English."*

Believe it or not, we had been talking over those quotation marks for several hours; we considered variations: *standardized Englishes* ("But will that just confuse students?"), *edited American English* ("How many of our faculty even know this term?"), or whether we should use the words "grammar" or "dialect." Eventually, we decided quotation marks would work. On one hand, they expressed our agreement with Laura Greenfield in *Writing Centers and the New Racism* that Standard English does not truly exist, that "'Standard English' is a qualifier ascribed to *many* ways of speaking (and by extension, though differently, writing) by privileged white people or, perhaps more accurately, any variety of English that has not been associated historically with resistance by communities of color" (43, emphasis in original). On the other hand, students would still be able to understand the sign well enough to locate the handouts.

The problem may seem small, but it's not. The solution may seem laughable, and in some ways, it is; that's why we're writing this article. As we stood back from that sign, we looked at one another with the frustrated, self-critical expressions we've worn with some frequency in the past year—grappling with the (il)logics of racism, with varieties of English in the classroom, and what writing centers can offer students of color in higher education.

It was obvious in that moment: that sign, and the point we were so carefully making with it, was clear and meaningful to no one but us. What it *said* was obscure, what it *did*—what it actually offered students navigating the university system that Grimm writes "was not designed for them" (104)—was negligible, too small even to be counted.

We could do better.

As sites of both scholarship and practice, writing centers are well-positioned to identify problems and to propose (and then enact and experiment with) solutions. The push and pull of this problem-solution dynamic frames our work and provides context for moments of frustration and insight like the one described above.

The "better" that we "could do," the solution that this article proposes (which we'll get to, and which we believe is considerably better than a pair of quotation marks on a sign), is a course-embedded writing mentors program that responds to the particular manifestations of language discrimination at a small, private HBCU. For those instructors who choose to participate in it, the program is intended to facilitate an instructor's implementation of code-meshing pedagogy. But first, the problem.

Problem

In 2005, Victor Villanueva challenged the Writing Center community to confront the "new racism"—that is, the "racism without racists" (Bonilla-Silva 4), which "embeds racism within a set of other categories—language, religion, culture, civilizations pluralized and writ large" (Villanueva 16). In the intervening years, many scholars have taken up Villanueva's call and discussions of race in the writing center and the writing classroom have necessarily focused on the role that language plays in the new racism, the way that language is racialized. For, as Villanueva put it, "behind [the language] there is a material reality—the reality of racism, still present, and not all that new after all" (19).

In *The Everyday Writing Center*, Geller, Eodice, Condon, Carroll and Boquet argued that writing centers cannot, because of their positioning within institutions and broader systems of power, "completely escape resembling and reproducing much of what students of color experience outside [writing center] spaces" (92). After all, writing centers situate

themselves as authorities on good writing, and within the academy, good writing is almost always Standard English writing, and Standard English is almost always perceived as white. And as Greenfield writes, "any practices that advocate the teaching of any privileged language will be—by definition—contributing to a system of inequity" (58).

How, then, do writing centers "escape"—even if imperfectly or incompletely—from cooperation in racially-biased academic practice on an institutional level? Naming the problem is not enough. And while current scholarship has admittedly named the problem well, the scholarship has thus far neglected to offer writing centers many practical, meaningful steps to go about challenging the larger community of academic practices that automatically (and often unwittingly) reinforce systems of racial privilege.

In a conversation with widespread implications for students of color, the voices of writing centers at HBCUs have been largely absent, at least in scholarly publication. The need for new pedagogy and practice at these institutions is pressing; traditional Standard English hegemony cannot end soon enough for those students for whom a single lecture in the vein of "all language varieties are equal"—however bolstering, however interesting—offers no new and useful ways to navigate the writing world. But how do we marry the practices of the writing center to the work of anti-racism without so upsetting the expectations of stakeholders (who have their own, often deeply entrenched ideas about language) that we jeopardize the funding of our space, its reputation or scope, or our job safety?

When it comes to resisting the predominance of "Standard English" in the academy, that old cliché bears heavy truth: *easier said than done*. Yet at some point our attention must turn from the ideological realm of *convincing* toward the messy, everyday realities of *accomplishing*.

We are, after all, a community of *praxis*, of embodied theories and realized ideas.

Solution

Code-meshing is a pedagogical approach that treats the blending of Standard and undervalued Englishes as a single integrated language system. Code-meshing has been theorized by Vershawn Ashanti Young "(1) as a framework for thinking about the relationship between African American literacy and Standard English, and (2) as an approach to teaching writing to African American students" (*Other People's English* 1).

As a method, code-meshing gives writing instructors a more meaningful way to resist reproducing oppression via language in the classroom than a few quotation marks on a sign. However, between affirming code-meshing on an ideological level and implementing it on a practical one—in a writing course for first- and second-year students, not specifically themed to address language diversity—there lies a significant gap.[1]

It is over this which we are attempting to build a bridge in the form of course-embedded writing mentors, marrying the ideological with the practical to facilitate code-meshing pedagogy, and fusing the writing center's antiracism efforts with classes outside its walls to challenge language discrimination on a more institutional level.

As pedagogy, code-meshing is relatively new, relatively unknown, rhetorically complex, threatening to the status quo, and something else besides: disruptive of the traditional authority paradigm of a classroom.[2] In a traditional paradigm, an instructor-student binary, the instructor and the student have relatively distinct assigned roles; the instructor is the language expert and the student is the language novice. In a code-meshing classroom, however, instructors are no longer necessarily the language experts—or at the very least, they are no longer the only ones in the room with language expertise. Students may bring to their writing undervalued Englishes in which they are quite fluent (possibly even expert) and of which the instructor may or may not be an expert (or even competent) user and/or reader.

This disruption of authority—in concert with the other unique elements of code-meshing pedagogy—opens a space for alternative paradigms to enter. Jim Henry and Holly H. Bruland have described the ways in which mentors in the composition classroom re-order the traditional classroom binary, substituting a new instructor-mentor-student "trinary" (309); in "Reconstructing Authority: Negotiating Power in Democratic Learning Sites," Candace Spigelman reflected on the ways in which classroom-based writing tutors serve to reconstruct authority in the classroom (185). Our writing mentor program has emerged in dialogue with both of these concepts.

Between instructors' position as writing evaluators and students' position as writing evaluated is the liminal space which mentors occupy. That liminal position in the classroom allows mentors to build trust with students in a way that instructors, because of their inescapable roles as evaluators, cannot. "Because," as Kim Brian Lovejoy writes, "code-meshing is a practice that students have not been

encouraged to attempt, teachers need to create an environment that will invite students to trust their language" (145). It is our belief that the addition of course-embedded mentors to the writing classroom will help create the environment of trust—and in particular, trust in students' languages—which is necessary to code-meshing.

For a number of reasons, instructors alone may struggle to create such an environment. First, because (as has been mentioned) instructors are positioned inescapably as gatekeepers. Even if an instructor applies an intentional strategy for honoring language variation—modifying rubrics, adding disclaimers to syllabi, giving affirming lectures—she is always swimming within the current of student expectation. Instructors contend not only with students lived relationship with their languages, but with all the years students spend inhabiting their roles as students.

That students have absorbed a certain set of narratives regarding academic writing is, we think, fairly indisputable. In "Code-meshing meets teaching the conflicts," Gerald Graff observes that "it seems clear that much of the bad writing we receive from students stems from the mistaken picture of 'proper,' academically correct, writing that students form out of their experience of schooling" (15). But students' expectations in a classroom encompass not just their ideas about student writing, but also those about instructors' roles. Introducing a new and typically unheard-of approach like code-meshing can raise suspicions about motives, leading to questions like those Lovejoy encountered: "'Is he settling for mediocrity and dumbing-down education?'; 'Is he forsaking responsibility to prepare students for the world of work?' or worse, 'Is the White guy engaging in a conspiracy to keep minorities in the underclass?'" (128).

And so code-meshing pedagogy asks far more of its students than the act of meshing (though that's complex enough). Indeed, "Teachers who adopt code-meshing as pedagogy," writes Lovejoy, "are … asking students to negotiate the writing classroom" (146). Even apart from the social, political, and economic pressures that add complexity to any issue involving racism, any pedagogy which asks to students to be critical of the classroom itself can be tricky, and destabilizing.

It is into this difficult-to-enact negotiation of the writing classroom that we believe peer mentors can step and provide an invaluable service. They provide *an* authority (for they do have some, unavoidably; see *On Location* for a thorough treatment) that is not also *the* authority. As a result, they can model for students the critical negotiation code-meshing demands in a way that instructors cannot. Even when instructors give students' permission and encouragement to code-mesh, even if instructors themselves possess a language background similar to that of the students (and this cannot be assumed), they are less effective models for the simple but unavoidable fact that they have achieved professional success and security in a way that students have not. When we gave one first-year writing class copies of Young's code-meshed article, "Should Writers Use They Own English," many of the students put forward a common complaint along the lines of *This is all very interesting, but* I *could never pull it off*. "Easy for this guy," said one student. "He's a doctor!"

Like instructors, mentors are examples of successful and confident language users, but unlike instructors, they are close enough in age and standing to be relatable, and meshing holds similar risks for them as it does for students. But more importantly—for we do not envision that mentors must be proficient at meshing in order to be proficient mentors—mentors are uniquely positioned to empower students to be critical of language ideology in the writing classroom. While instructors can invite students to be critical of the classroom, they are always, at the end of the day a) directing and representing that same classroom, and b) sabotaging, to an extent, their own trustworthiness (via their evaluative role). By contrast, mentors can actually *be* critical and build trust through their non-evaluative (or at least, less evaluative) peer relationship.

In some ways, then, mentors can occupy positions of classroom authority that reflect the liminal, contradictory positions of any opposing oppression—participating, even as they are resisting; resisting, even as they are participating. As a result, course-embedded mentors are well-situated to help instructors generate conditions more effective for supporting students as they make informed, critical choices about language than those instructors might be able to manage on their own in a traditional binary.[3]

So far, we've talked about our *proposed* idea and what it is we *believe* and *will do*—which begins to sound remarkably hypocritical, considering the stress we placed on the need for action, practice, solutions, and accomplishing. We would like to explain now what it is that we *have done*—the "pre-pilot" we experimented with this past spring—and how it informs what we plan for the current academic year. To borrow from business terminology, the pre-pilot is our "proof of concept," the evidence that establishes an idea, process, or model as feasible.

In the spring of 2014, one of our Writing Center's peer readers was able to enter a writing classroom and fill the role that we've described. It was early in the semester and Cecilia was trying to implement code-meshing pedagogy, inviting her students (most of them first-years) to make rhetorical choices that would blend their devalued Englishes with the Standard English.

One assignment asked them to consider music lyrics as a reflection of (the myth of) the American Dream, with questions such as: "Who has access to the American Dream?"; "Who or what creates it?"; and "How does it look differently for different people?" Ultimately, students would compose and then critique their own "Soundtrack of the American Dream"—a playlist of songs that represented the American Dream to each of them.

Unfortunately, the conversation was going awry.

The students were espousing sanitized, commercial opinions, seeming eager to offer the "correct" answers. No one was complicating the generic ideals discussed, and Cecilia was determined not to tell them what to think. So she invited one of our peer readers, Dominique, to join the class and the discussion. When students began again with comments like, "Everybody can succeed if they work hard!", he was able to read the room and understand where the breakdown was occurring. He posed a question: "Yeah, but can they? What about people who been to prison?" There was a brief pause. "Or what about people who *been* working hard…at McDonald's?"

To be clear, Cecilia had already asked very similar questions, but they had been meet with relative silence and consternation, with students reluctant to answer because they didn't know what the "right" answer was—the "for school" answer. Dominique was better able to challenge that type of student performance, to model critical thinking in a way that invited students to do the same. And he was able to do it in the language of his peers.

One student answered Dominique: "I got a uncle who came out of jail and was tryin' to do the right thing, but just couldn't get a shot." A few other students nodded in agreement. A conversation ensued that was more critical of the mainstream notion of the American Dream. The students, watching Dominique, began to include alternative American narratives—ones that were marginalized and controversial—and to debate the validity of different ways of aspiring to the American Dream. Some students validated the new lines of reasoning; others rejected them. What was important: they were far more interested in what their classmates thought than in what they thought Cecilia the Instructor "expected" them to say.

After a far more engaged and fruitful conversation, the class transitioned to an activity designed to help the students practice the kind of analysis that their "Soundtrack" assignment would require. They compared two music videos, Miley Cyrus's "Party in the USA" and Lil Wayne's "God Bless Amerika," and considered how the overall messages about the artists' experiences of America were reflected in images and lyrics.[4]

The conversation that Dominique had just led primed students to examine the music with a critical eye. Students were asked to think about the role that language was playing in each song. Dominique continued to attend, helping the students make comparisons, speaking in a meshed blend of Standard and African-American English. He was able to reconstruct the parameters of classroom discussion in a way that did more than give students permission to think critically and use all the language varieties available to them; his modeling supported code-meshing pedagogy in a way that Cecilia simply hadn't been able to manage on her own.

His success in that class helped us to conceptualize the shape and scope of the writing mentors program—the training that we plan for the fall, and the official pilot we plan for the spring.

Writing Mentors Training – Fall 2014

The specificity and complexity of the goals of our writing mentors program requires a semester's worth of preparation for prospective writing mentors. Because mentors will be selected from among the Writing Center's peer readers, the training for the program builds on our existing training practicum, which is completed concurrently with a peer reader's first semester of work in the Writing Center and focuses on writing center theory, pedagogy, and practice. The writing mentors training program will work off this foundation to focus on preparing mentors to facilitate code-meshing pedagogy in the classroom.

We have set three goals for this training. Writing mentors will:

- Reflect on the development of their confidence as writers and evaluate their own success and proficiency with language;
- Develop a critical awareness of the social, political, economic and educational issues that impact language usage and instruction; and,

- Expand and complicate their awareness of and response to the classroom as a rhetorical situation, taking their new roles as mentors into account.[5]

From among our staff of peer readers, we will recruit prospective writing mentors who demonstrate particular interest in or aptitude for responding to language variation in writing. The recruitment process will culminate in a written application that discusses the applicant's language attitudes and begins the process of reflection. We anticipate a very small group of writing mentor trainees—between two and three per training cycle. (Our staff of peer readers numbers only ten.)

Training will employ a number of methods of instruction: small seminar-style discussion, independent reading/writing assignments, and guided classroom observations. A series of writing tasks will serve as our primary method of assessing growth and change in mentors over the course of the training program and their first semester of mentorship. The written application will serve as the benchmark for each mentor's initial attitudes and observations regarding language, mentorship, racism, and the writing classroom. Two additional writing assignments will document the development of their critical language consciousness and increased rhetorical awareness: 1) a discussion of their expectations for their mentoring experience at the end of the training semester, and 2) a more comprehensive reflection on their experiences at the end of the first semester of work as a writing mentor.

Writing Mentors Pilot – Spring 2015

The Spring 2015 semester will serve as the official pilot for the writing mentors program. One writing mentor will be assigned to each of the writing center administrators and her respective section of the Critical Writing Seminar course. Writing mentorship will take place both inside and outside the writing classroom. Mentors will be required to attend class with the students they mentor for at least half of the contact hours each week. Their contributions to class activities and discussions will be determined in consultation with the course instructor. In addition, mentors will offer reserved consultation hours in the writing center for the students they mentor. While these consultations will not differ from typical Writing Center consultations, mentors will be asked to complete additional documentation of their work with mentees through consultation logs.

Both mentors and instructors will document their experiences through audio recorded reflections after each class meeting. Additional assessments of the writing mentors program will include surveys and focus groups for students and selected case studies of code meshing in student writing.

As we poured over the plans and timelines that were giving shape to this idea, adjusting readings lists, assignments, and course schedules to accommodate the presence of a mentor and the heightened attention to code-meshing, we felt a familiar trepidation creeping up. For just a moment, we were gripped by the same frustrated and self-critical feelings first caused by those quotation marks on that grammar handout sign. *What are we doing?* (We don't know!) *Who have we told?* (Almost no one). The unflattering and honest truth is that we are not broadcasting our writing mentors program very loudly these days. The "feelers" we've put out among colleagues and administrators about code-meshing pedagogy have let us to believe that, given the complex language ideologies at an HBCU, building consensus around this program will be a difficult process. In fact, our ability to conduct this experiment in course-embedded mentoring owes little to colleague "buy-in"; it is possible only through the lucky intersection of two realities: 1) that as Writing Center administrators we have the independence to expand the responsibilities and tasks of some of our peer readers to include participation in the writing mentors program, and 2) that we serve as both coordinators and instructors of a required writing course, a position which gives us the authority to shape that course to fit the writing mentors program in ways both broad (course-wise) and specific (section-wise).

In the interest of full confession: before we summon up the courage to challenge language ideology on a broader scale at our institution, we are hoping to gather substantial evidence to back our claims with this first year of trial and error. We admit that perhaps this isn't the road-most-taken, strategy-wise. Sometimes, we feel as if we are standing at the edge of a deep pool, and where other scholars have waded in, careful to make space for their presence and to keep from disrupting other swimmers, we've just gone ahead, cannonballed in, and begun doggie paddling in an energetic, but naïve fashion—splashing wildly.

We know that our plans are not going to change the white-preferential academy overnight, nor beliefs within our own institutional community. But, as Canagarajah writes, "The classroom is a powerful site of policy negotiation. The pedagogies practiced and

texts produced in the classroom can reconstruct policies from the ground up. In fact, the classroom is already a policy site; every time teachers insist on a uniform variety of language or discourse, we are helping reproduce monolinguist ideologies and linguistic hierarchies" ("Pluralization Continued" 587).

We are trying to utilize the power of the classroom. We are trying. We do fear that by asking that the burden of that attempt fall heavily on students—to take language risks in service of this ideology and to take them alone—might be acknowledging the right problem, but coming up with the wrong solution. Ultimately, we do intend to use the results of our course-embedded writing mentors program, and hopefully its successes, to extend our antiracist practices beyond the writing center, beyond classes taught solely by its administrators, and out to others; our ultimate goal is nothing less than overhaul of the institution's language ideology. But first, we need to practice.

Notes

[1] The pedagogical examples provided by Young, Lovejoy, and Canagarajah, while useful, are not very generalizable; they occurred within courses designed for upper-level undergraduate or graduate students, or within courses for which language variety or undervalued Englishes comprised the main thrust, theme, or topic.

[2] Suresh Canagarajah writes that "code meshing is a complex discursive act for our students" (602). Not only does it ask students to manage fairly sophisticated rhetorical and writing tasks when choosing *how* to mesh the language varieties available to them to best effect, but it presumes all the while that they clearly distinguish between/among those varieties, and possess both the control and the rhetorical awareness to determine *where* and *when* to mesh most effectively.

[3] We do not mean to suggest that students who choose *not* to code-mesh will be making less of an informed, critical decision about their language use. We are in agreement with Lovejoy: "A teacher and classroom that privilege code-meshing are not prejudiced against the narrower Standard English or those who idealize it. They simply provide the opportunity for others to be heard as well" (128-129).

[4] Full credit for this assignment goes to Christopher Massenburg of the Saint Augustine's University English Department. He also deserves credit as a co-creator of the critical writing course that allowed for the assignment's creation and implementation.

[5] Our training program relies on the existing peer reader practicum to establish the "generalist literacy training" that Mary Soliday argues in *On Location*, "can successfully bridge specialized writing situations (15). It then focuses on preparing our writing mentors, who will be "present at the rhetorical scene" (56), to "be aware of the rhetorical complexity—both interpersonal and intertextual—that any given tutorial can entail" (Corbett, par. 5).

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